

De La Salle reap rewards of foundations laid for future

Brothers in arms – from primary school to Croke Park

■ **Jamie O'Keeffe**
SPORTS EDITOR

The finishing touches are still being put to De La Salle GAA Club's new €3.5million clubhouse and playing-fields complex at Knockhouse in the expanding suburb of Gracedieu, ensuring the legacy of what's been achieved in 2008-'09 will be a lasting one.

As well as two full-size pitches, the new grounds include a clubhouse incorporating dressing rooms, offices and amenities for juvenile players. In 2003 the club sold their Stephen Street social centre to part-fund the new greenfield project.

Though still a work-in-progress, having only opened on a limited scale last summer, the club held its first AGM at Gracedieu before Christmas, with the development committee of Joey Carton, Tom O'Leary, Liam Flynn and Dermot Carey singled out for special mention by the executive, chaired by Seamus Quirke.

The committee plan to keep its existing Cleaboy Road pitch for the foreseeable future to cater for its burgeoning playing population. Some 140 kids are coached between the two venues every Saturday morning.

They've certainly come a long way since Brother John Murphy founded De La Salle Hurling & Football Club in 1927.

(That was the year incidentally that the Grand Marshall of this year's Waterford St Patrick's Day Parade, Val Doonican, was born in the city. Indeed, the young Michael Valentine attended school in De La Salle College, but was forced to leave and take up work after his father died when he was 14.)

A Kildare man, who was a teacher at the St Stephens School, Brother John's vision was to create a club for past-pupils. That close connection between education and Gaelic Games lives on this day. Indeed, the crest of St John Baptist de la Salle is still displayed on its white & red jerseys.

The club was originally called St Stephens, winning successive county senior hurling championships in 1913-'14 (albeit based on young Lasallian trainees, mostly from other counties, such as Willie Hough, who captained Limerick to the All-Ireland title in 1918). However, it was later changed to De La Salle to embrace all the Order's schools in the city – i.e. St Stephens, St Declans (both primary) and De La Salle College (secondary).

Thus De La Salle is based around its 'feeder' schools – a pupil population of almost 1,000 – rather than the traditional parish model. Those links were highlighted by De La Salle College's successes in being crowned Munster and All-Ireland Colleges Hurling champions in 2007



De La Salle team captain John Mullane with fellow county players Bryan Phelan and Kevin Moran, and Michael Veale, manager, Tramore branch of AIB (club championship sponsors) chatting in the dressing-rooms at the Waterford champions' new Gracedieu grounds. | PHOTO: PAT MURPHY-SPORTSFILE

and '08. The school has also won two Dean Ryan Cups in recent seasons.

Two members of the club's senior hurling panel, teachers Derek McGrath, a Minor All-Ireland runner-up in 1992, and former Offaly U21 hurler Dermot Dooley, managed those Harty and Croke Cup-winning teams, and in all seven of this year's DLS panel played a part in their back-to-back victories. Waterford player Kevin Moran and his club-mate Paudie Nevin (on the verge of an inter-county call-up) are also teachers, at De La Salle College.

Early success

Rewind nearly 80 years and club success came quickly initially with a county minor football championship in 1930 and five county senior football titles that decade – including four-in-a-row – and a sixth in 1958.

However, as other city clubs came to the fore, De La Salle struggled for a long time and came close to being disbanded in the late 1970s such was

the apparent disinterest.

However, the committee rallied and the commitment of those who dug deep, determined to keep the club going against the odds, has paid off in spades, with families like the Brenners, the Daltons and the Duggans among those who worked so hard towards its revival.

De La Salle's renaissance was led by the late Edward (Sonny) Walsh, who, having set up the juvenile club, died suddenly in the spring of 1983 while doing what he loved: training youngsters at Cleaboy. The grounds there are dedicated to his memory, as is the 'B' section of the annual All-Ireland Under 14 Hurling tournament in Waterford.

The club's fortunes began to turn in 1985 when the Under 14s reached the county final, only to lose to Lismore, who also beat them in the U16 decider two years later.

However, after a victory in the prestigious Under 16 Kilmacud Crokes 7-a-side tournament De La

Salle made a major breakthrough in winning the 1989 County Minor Championship; that side, driven by Johnny Brenner, avenging their losses to Lismore in the process.

In 1990 De La Salle won the Intermediate Hurling Championship final by a point under the 19-year-old Brenner's inspirational captaincy, and a senior league the following year. The Holy Grail seemed just around the corner – were it not for two obstacles: Mount Sion and Ballygunner.

Youth policy

Current committee member Joey Carton, now Munster Games Development Manager and one of hurling's most respected coaches, and especially Davy Duggan, were key figures in nurturing the club's youngsters during that epochal period.

The fruits of the club's labours at underage level resulted in All-Ireland

Féile na nGael Division Two triumph in 1999 (a team coached by Derek McGrath, that observers reckoned was good enough to have won the 'A' grade). Indeed, eight of that squad are currently on the De La Salle senior hurling panel.

It wasn't just hurling that was on the up, with Peil na nÓg victories following in 2000 and '01, while in 2003 De La Salle became only the third club in the country to win both the Peil na nÓg and Féile na nGael competitions in the same year. Five of the hurling squad have also gone on to play for the senior side.

Since 1998 the club has won several underage county titles, including a historic U14 and U16 hurling and football double in 2001. At present the club fields nine adult teams from minor to senior in hurling, and minor to intermediate in football, and has one of the largest and most successful juvenile sections in the southeast.

In 2005 another milestone was reached with a second county minor hurling championship, while the seniors reached the county final, only to agonisingly lose (to Ballygunner) by a single point, as did the club's promotion-seeking intermediate footballers in the Waterford decider.

However, all good things come to those who wait... and wait, and wait. The moment the club had longed for finally arrived last November when John Mullane – a player who'd grown from a Tony Forristal 'B' team member to one of hurling's finest and best-known talents – captained the senior hurling team to a first ever county title, beating Abbotside in the decider on a quagmire of a pitch in Fraher Field, amid scenes of unbridled euphoria.

As PRO John Sheehan said: "It was a day that we wondered would we ever see, but we finally did it, to the lasting credit of a group of players – the entire panel of 32, plus of course team manager Owen Dunphy, trainer Micko Casey and selectors Jack Duggan, Alan Dillon, Philip Burke and Brendan Fennelly and all the backroom staff – who believed in their ability and showed exemplary character and resilience."

With the Under 21s, managed by Stephen Brenner, also capturing the county title, the fairytale continued with a provincial crown, captured against Adare on a never-to-be-forgotten late November afternoon in Thurles, with the club's efforts on and off the field duly rewarded with the Munster GAA Council's club of the year award.

2009 has seen more history made, with De La Salle the first club to reach the All-Ireland Club SHC final at their first attempt. They are also Waterford's first finalists since Mount Sion in 1982, and are the first Portlárige team to play in Croke Park on St Patrick's Day.

Bro Murphy *et al* how art in Heaven, take a bow.